



Philadelphia's Immigrants: Race and Ethnicity

Traditional delineations are changing, and migration patterns are shifting

Overview

Immigrants are changing Philadelphia's racial and ethnic makeup of the past century. Along the way, their population has grown in almost every part of the city, infusing each area with a wide array of languages, cuisines, cultures, and customs. And most immigrants came to Philadelphia from other U.S. cities, rather than directly from abroad.

Black and White Philadelphians

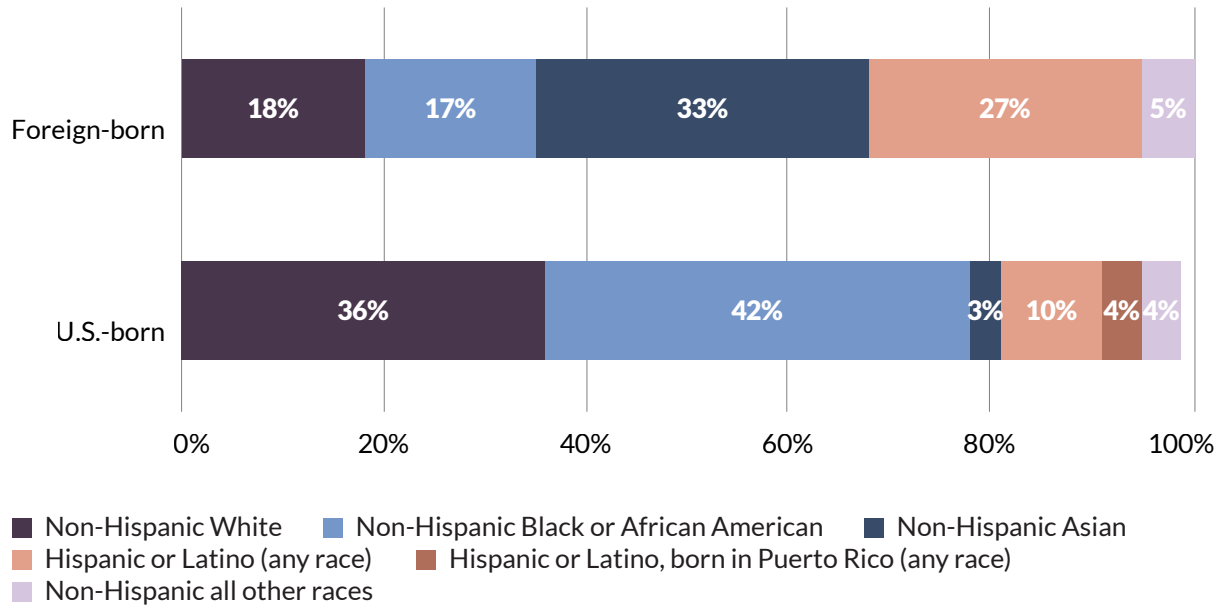
Through most of the 20th century, nearly all Philadelphians were either non-Hispanic White or non-Hispanic Black or African American, together making up 85% of the population as recently as 2000.

But during the past two decades, the number of Black and White Philadelphians has dropped; the combined total was down to 72% as of 2022. Rising immigration, along with the decrease of both White and Black U.S.-born residents, is diversifying the city racially and ethnically. Fewer than half of immigrants living in Philadelphia (35%) identified as either non-Hispanic Black or non-Hispanic White, although there were sizable groups from Africa. The majority of foreign-born Philadelphians identified as Latino or Asian, with the latter group growing by 73% since 2000 and expanding its communities citywide, as discussed in a companion fact sheet in this series. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Foreign-Born and U.S.-Born Philadelphians by Race and Ethnicity, 2018-22

Influx of people born overseas increases the city's racial and ethnic diversity



Note: The Census Bureau in 2020 changed the options respondents can use to identify their race and ethnicity, so percentages should be taken with caution when comparing over time.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, one-year estimates, 2022, from IPUMS USA, <http://www.ipums.org>; R.H. Lowe Jr. et al., "Black and Some Other Race?: Examining Shifts in the Black Latino Population in the Census Bureau's Modified Race Question" (n.d.), <https://ideas.repec.org/p/osf/socarx/5g6vs.html>

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Latino Philadelphians

Philadelphia's long-standing Latino population roughly doubled in size between 2000 and 2022, increasing from around 130,000 to 252,400. About 40% of the growth came from immigrants born in Latin America, led by people from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Guatemala, and Colombia. In 2022, immigrants made up 22% of Philadelphia's Latino population, up from 13% in 2000.

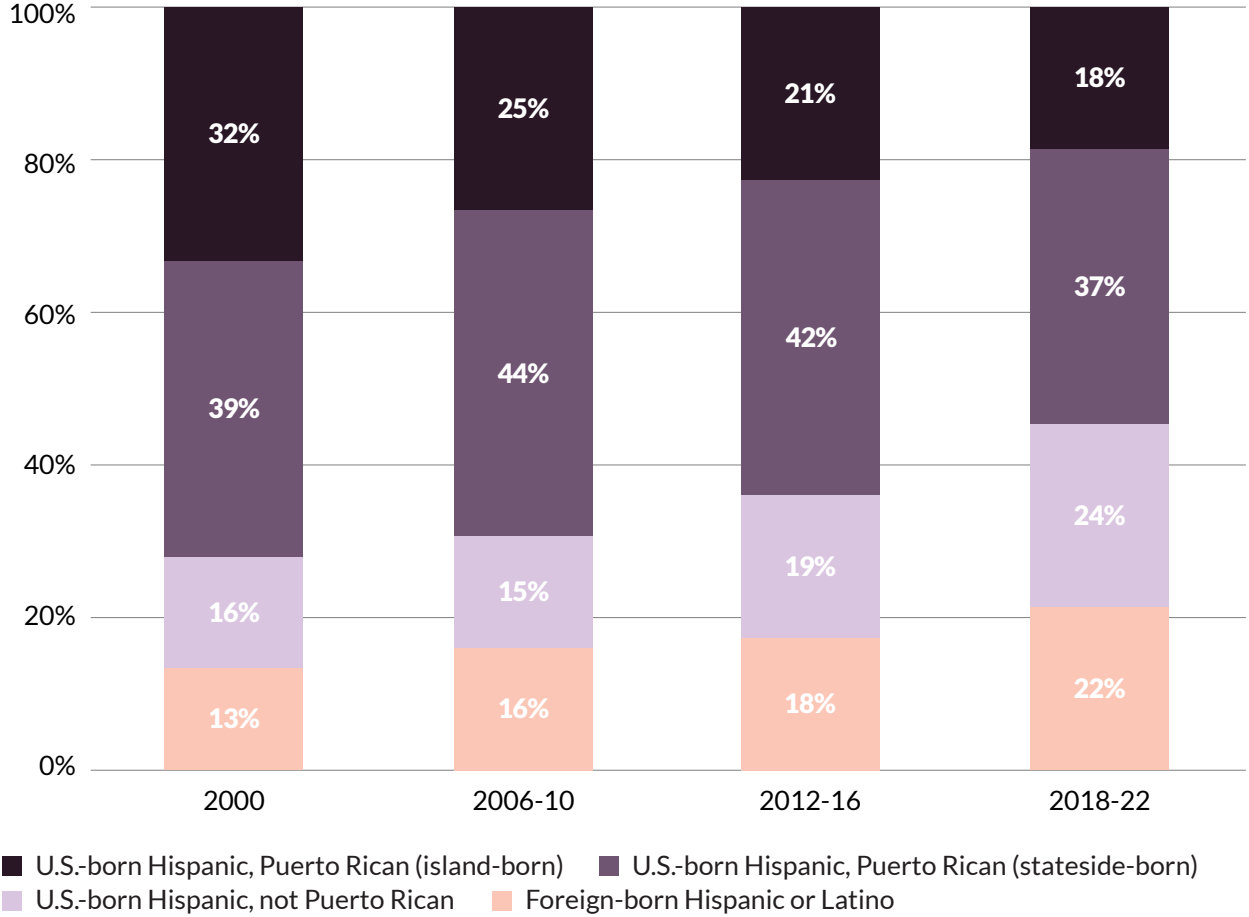
The other 78% were U.S.-born Latinos and were majority Puerto Rican, whose community has undergone its own significant shift between those born on the island and those born in the 50 U.S. states or the District of Columbia. Since 1917, anybody born on the island of Puerto Rico has had U.S. citizenship and can move freely to and around the United States. One of the top destinations was Philadelphia. The share of the population identifying as Puerto Rican is still growing today but in a different way: From 2000 to 2022, the number of Philadelphians identifying as stateside-born Puerto Rican grew 83% (to around 92,000), while the share of those born on the island declined 9% (to 37,500). That means that 7 in 10 Puerto Rican Philadelphians identify as Puerto Rican because of their parents and ancestors, not because of their own birthplace. (See Figure 2.)

The birthplace distinction matters, because island-born Puerto Ricans—in terms of their culture, beliefs, and language—more closely resemble immigrants than U.S.-born Latinos do, according to studies by Pew Research

Center and others.¹ Theirs is an immigrant experience in many ways except citizenship. In contrast, stateside-born Puerto Ricans tend to have experiences, backgrounds, and concerns more typical of other U.S.-born citizens.

“Island-born people have a completely different experience here,” said Nasheli Ortiz González, former executive director of Taller Puertorriqueño, a nonprofit organization supporting Puerto Rican arts and culture in Philadelphia.

Figure 2
Latino Philadelphians Born in the U.S., Puerto Rico, and Abroad
 Immigrants are diversifying the city’s Latino population, which had previously been largely Puerto Rican



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Decennial Census; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata five-year estimates, 2006-10, 2012-16, 2018-22

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Immigrant neighborhoods

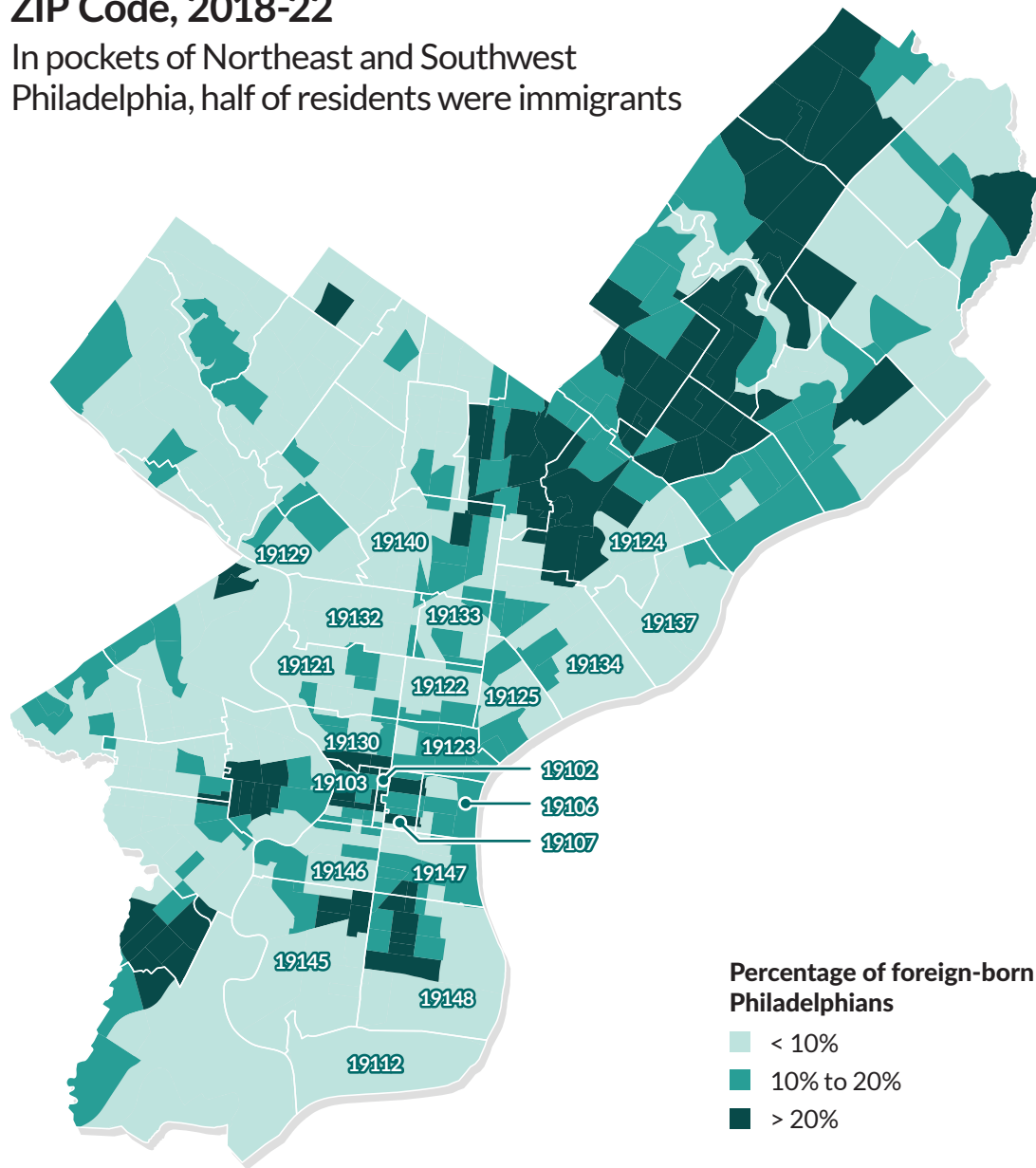
It’s an old pattern in Philadelphia and many other cities: New immigrants may settle near one another in certain neighborhoods for social and financial support or affordability. Often, their concentrations dissipate or shift as people move to other areas of the city and region, for a variety of reasons, and they may be replaced by new waves of immigrants or native Philadelphians.

Northeast Philadelphia has long had the largest concentration and variety of immigrants in the city; in 2022, ZIP codes 19116 (Somerton) and 19149 (Oxford Circle) had some of the city's highest percentages of immigrants per capita. Increasingly, other communities are growing too: Southwest, South, and West Philadelphia and part of Center City have all seen increases in foreign-born residents within the past decade. At the same time, a few areas—including Callowhill (-6%) and Queen Village (-9%)—have seen declines in their share of foreign-born residents. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3

Foreign-Born Share of Population by ZIP Code, 2018-22

In pockets of Northeast and Southwest Philadelphia, half of residents were immigrants



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, five-year sample, 2018-22, Table DP02: Selected Social Characteristics in the United States, <http://data.census.gov>

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Domestic migration

As an immigrant gateway, Philadelphia has mainly been a place where immigrants come from and go to within the country, not necessarily where they first arrived in the United States. On average in the past decade, among the city's newest immigrants (those in the U.S. for a year or less), around half came from another U.S. location and not directly from abroad. In contrast, new immigrants to Boston and New York City, for example, were much more likely to come directly from abroad.² This indicates that Philadelphia has been an affordable domestic choice for immigrants already in the United States more than a global destination.

Immigrants' movement from one U.S. location to another after arriving in the country is known as domestic or secondary migration, and it has a long history. Knowing where immigrants lived in the United States before and after Philadelphia could provide clues to city boosters looking to attract and keep more of these residents. Research has found that immigrants are more likely than U.S. natives to uproot for a job, family connection, or entrepreneurial opportunity, although the top U.S. origin and destination locations are similar for both groups.³

A large majority of immigrants moving to Philadelphia from another U.S. location resided in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, the city's most populous suburban neighbor, in the previous year. (The same as U.S.-born residents.) The second top place of origin was Brooklyn (Kings County, New York), followed by the Bronx (Bronx County, New York) and Delaware County, Pennsylvania. Areas along the U.S. southern border do not show up in the census data as top places of residence for immigrants in the year before they lived in the city of Philadelphia (not including suburban counties).⁴

For foreign-born Philadelphians who left in the previous year, Montgomery and Delaware counties in Pennsylvania were the top two destinations, followed by Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and Brooklyn (Kings County, New York).⁵ (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Top U.S. County of Origin and Destination for Philadelphia Immigrants, 2018-22

Listed in order of number of movers; Montgomery County is top origin and destination

Top U.S. counties of origin	Top U.S. counties of destination
Montgomery County, Pennsylvania	Montgomery County, Pennsylvania
Kings County, New York	Kings County, New York
Delaware County, Pennsylvania	Delaware County, Pennsylvania
Bronx County, New York	Bronx County, New York
Burlington County, New Jersey	New York County, New York
Camden County, New Jersey	Chester County, Pennsylvania
Queens County, New York	Camden County, New Jersey
Bucks County, Pennsylvania	Burlington County, New Jersey
Chester County, Pennsylvania	Queens County, New York

Note: County is based on the respondent's residence one year before answering the survey. The U.S. Census Bureau defines "residence" as the place where a person lives and sleeps "usually" or "most of the time," regardless of whether it was their legal or personal residence.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (2022 five-year estimates); U.S. Census Bureau, "Residence Criteria and Residence Situations for the 2020 Census of the United States," <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/programs-surveys/decennial/2020-census/2020-Census-Residence-Criteria.pdf>

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A smaller number of immigrants typically move to or from Philadelphia beyond the 11-county metropolitan area, typically motivated by economic needs and opportunities more than personal or family ones.⁶ (Short-distance migration in this report refers to moves within the 11-county metropolitan region, and long distance is outside the metro region.) The top long-distance destinations one year after leaving Philadelphia were all on the East Coast—except one, Los Angeles County in California. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

Short- and Long-Distance Destinations for Philadelphia Immigrants, 2018-22

Top counties of residence one year after leaving the city

Short-distance destination	Long-distance destination
Montgomery County, Pennsylvania	Kings County, New York
Delaware County, Pennsylvania	Bronx County, New York
Chester County, Pennsylvania	New York County, New York
Camden County, New Jersey	Queens County, New York
Burlington County, New Jersey	Mercer County, New Jersey
Bucks County, Pennsylvania	District of Columbia
New Castle County, Delaware	Bergen County, New Jersey
Gloucester County, New Jersey	Los Angeles County, California

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample (2018-22 five-year estimates)

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Slowly but inexorably, immigrants are changing Philadelphia racially, ethnically, and culturally, leading to shifts in the city's long-standing Black, White, and Puerto Rican majorities. Immigrants are infusing many areas of the city with more languages, cuisines, and cultures. And a large share are choosing to live in Philadelphia after trying other U.S. cities and the surrounding suburban counties.

To learn more about immigration in Philadelphia and how it compares with immigration in other cities and nationwide, visit our [featured webpage](#) on the topic.

Endnotes

- 1 Lauren Mora and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Latinos' Views of and Experiences With the Spanish Language," Pew Research Center (2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2023/09/20/latinos-views-of-and-experiences-with-the-spanish-language/>.
- 2 Pew analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Residence 1 Year Ago, five-year estimates, obtained from University of Minnesota, "IPUMS USA," <http://www.ipums.org>.
- 3 Pia Orrenius, "Benefits of Immigration Outweigh the Costs," George W. Bush Institute (2016), <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/north-american-century/benefits-of-immigration-outweigh-costs>; Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan, *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).
- 4 In this fact sheet, domestic migration does not include the type of movement seen in the highly publicized busing of approximately 2,930 people from Texas to Philadelphia in 2022 and 2023. News reports indicated that those individuals had only recently crossed the border and presumably had not been Texas residents, as meant by domestic migration. Likewise, around 90% of them quickly left Philadelphia and did not become city residents, either, said Amy Eusebio, executive director of Philadelphia's Office of Immigrant Affairs, in an email interview with Pew.
- 5 American Community Survey data does not indicate whether immigrants' previous residence was their first in the United States or why they chose a particular destination over another.
- 6 According to the Brookings Institution, people who migrate a short distance usually do so for personal or family-related reasons. People who move long distances generally do so for reasons related to economic advancement. See William H. Frey, "Americans' Local Migration Reached a Historic Low in 2022, but Long-Distance Moves Picked Up," *Brookings Institution*, Feb. 2, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/americans-local-migration-reached-a-historic-low-in-2022-but-long-distance-moves-picked-up/>.

Editor's note: This text was updated on Sept. 3, 2024, to correct the population growth of Asian immigrants since 2000.

For more information, please visit: pewtrusts.org/philaresearch

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